BEING PERFECT IS NOT NECESSARY FOR BEING GOD

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Abstract. Classic perfect being theologians take 'being perfect' (or some careful variant thereof) to be conceptually necessary and sufficient for being God. I argue that this claim is false because being perfect is not conceptually necessary for being God. I rest my case on a simple thought experiment inspired by an alternative I developed to perfect being theology that I call "functional theology." My findings, if correct, are a boon for theists since if it should turn out that there is no perfect being, there could still be a God.

According to perfect being theology, being perfect is necessary for being God. In fact, classic perfect being theologians understand the word 'God' to have a sense, and take 'being perfect' (or some careful variant thereof) to be conceptually necessary and sufficient for being God. Descartes, for example, offers a definition of God as "the substance which we understand to be supremely perfect," and Anselm tacitly identifies the concept of "something than which nothing greater can be thought" with the concept of God.[1] For this kind of perfect being theologian, to think that there is an open question about whether God is perfect is like thinking that there is an open question about whether a triangle has three angles: in either case, this is to misunderstand the concept altogether.

Here I will argue that, whether being perfect is sufficient *de dicto* for being God or not, it is not necessary. If I am right, then *a fortiori* it is not necessary and sufficient *de dicto* for being God, and classic perfect being theology of Descartes' and Anselm's type is mistaken.

There are several possible lines of argument against perfect being theology at least in its instantiation in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the tradition which will ground my discussion here. For example, one might mount a scriptural case, or a historical one, or one from intuitions about ordinary use of the word 'God', or one from charitability.[2] But here I will rest my case on a simple thought experiment inspired by an alternative I developed to perfect being theology I call "functional theology." The experiment itself is brief, but to state it, it will help me first to explain functional theology and show that it is a genuine alternative to perfect being theology. I will then offer the thought experiment and close by defending it against an objection.

I. FUNCTIONAL THEOLOGY

Functional theology starts with the intuition that what qualifies something to be God has more to do with what it does than with what it is, more to do with its role in the world, with the functions it has, than with what it is like in itself.

Ia. Precedent for functional theology.

There is strong *scriptural* precedent for this intuition — for understanding who God is in terms of what God does. The Psalmists and Jeremiah, for example, identify God "by citing his deeds," as one source

1 See Descartes' Second Set of Replies, AT VII 162 (and also, e.g., Third Meditation AT VII, 46 and Fifth Meditation, AT VII, 65); Anselm's *Proslogion* ii.

2 See Jeanine Diller, "The Content and Coherence of Theism" (Univ. of Michigan, 2000).

says, e.g., they describe God as the being who "made heaven and earth… [who] shows kindness to the thousandth generation… [who] freed…Israel from the land of Egypt."[3] The Deuteronomic code instructs parents to tell their children about God by recounting God's activity in the history of Israel. When the various writers of the Hebrew Bible refer to God, or record God referring to Godself, the phrases used often imply action (e.g., 'God the Provider', 'God of Armies', and "I am the Lord who brought you out from under the burden of the Egyptians").[4] Indeed, Maimonides claims that *all* the names of God in the Hebrew Bible — save YHWH — are derived from verbs.[5] Such identifications of God run over into the New Testament, e.g., according to one source: "After Easter, for the believing community, God is preeminently the 'God who raised Jesus from the dead'. Insofar as there is any specific New Testament definition of God, this is it."[6]

There is also *theological* precedent for identifying God in terms of God's actions. Aquinas does this in the Five Ways when he identifies God as the First Mover, the First Cause, etc. Davies explains this Thomist theme: "We do not start with a knowledge of God. We begin as knowing the world in which we live" (25).

We find even stronger precedent for identifying God by God's actions in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, especially I.52-54. Maimonides famously says here that statements of the form 'God is P' are *false* when P is a "definition" or "part of its definition" or a "certain quality" of the thing, or even "a relation."[7] Among his reasons for these denials is that these predicates entail composing their subjects into parts and also entail the subject's dependence on these parts, both of which are anathema since God is essentially one and independent. In sharp contrast, Maimonides takes statements of the form 'God is P' to be at least potentially *true* when P accurately states *God's actions*; he calls these predicates "attributes of action." The key reason they can be true is because attributes of action are "remote from God's essence." Look here:

> I intend to signify by the words, 'his action' [mention quotes mine], the action that he who is described has performed — as when say *Zayd is the one who carpentered this door, built this particular wall or wove this garment.* Now this kind of attribute is remote from the essence of the thing of which it is predicated. For this reason it is permitted that this kind should be predicated of God, may He be exalted, after you have… come to know…that the acts in question…are all of them carried out by means of His essence and not by a superadded notion. (I.52)

Again, in I.53:

> Fire, for example, melts some things, hardens others, cooks, burns, bleaches, and blackens. If a man were to describe fire as *that which bleaches and blackens, burns and cooks, hardens and melts,* he would be right. Someone who did not understand the nature of fire would suppose it contained six different principles … but someone who understood the nature of fire would understand that it brings about all these different effects

3 The precise wording is from Jer. 32; the other passages to which I allude are Deut. 6:20-3; 26:5-10; Josh. 24:2-13; and Ps. 78, 105, 106. These examples come from the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, which identifies them as 'Israelite credos' — short statements of the Jewish faith in the Hebrew Bible — and characterizes them thus: "When Israel wished to profess its belief in Yahweh, its 'knowledge' of him, it uttered its profession by reciting his deeds in history" (Raymond E. Brown, Joseph E. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice-Hall, 1990), 77:50 and 115).

4 Ex. 6:7 and Lev. 19:36. Again, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur" (Gen. 15:7); and "I am the Lord who sanctifies you" (Lev. 20:8; variations, 21:15, 22:16, 32).

5 See *Guide* I: 61.

6 Reginald Fuller, "God in the New Testament", in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*: *Vol. VI.*, ed. Mircea Eliade (Macmillan Publishing Co, 1987), 9 citing Rom. 10:9. Cohen tells a marvelous story that makes the same point: 'After hearing a pastoral letter form the bishop of Alexandria and a sermon from his abbot which insisted that…God has no shape, one elderly monk arose to pray but could not. 'Woe is me! They have taken my God away from me!' he wailed. Popular piety does not need or want an immutable and shapeless Prime Mover; it wants *a God who reveals himself to people, listens to prayer, and can be grasped in human terms*. This is the God of the *Shema*, the Bible and the liturgy. This is the God of practically all the Hebrew and Aramaic, and some of the Greek, Jewish literature of antiquity. It is not, however, the God of the philosophers" (87, emphasis added). See also William J. Hill, "The Attributes of God", in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (Macmillan Publishing Co, 1971), 512 and Walter M. Horton, *Christian Theology: An Ecumenical Approach* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1958), 85.

7 This is tantamount in contemporary jargon to saying that 'God is P' is false when P is a conceptually necessary and sufficient condition, or just a conceptually necessary condition, or an accidental intrinsic property, or an *n*-place relation.

> by one active quality, heat. If this occurs with things which act by nature, how much more would it be so with a voluntary agent — how much more so with Him who transcends all description …

How do attributes of action of a thing manage to stay remote from its essence in these examples? In both, Maimonides distinguishes between two aspects of a thing: (1) its actions and (2) its essence or nature that underlies these actions. Specifically, he identifies the thing — Zayd in the first case and fire in the second — *by way of* its actions — e.g., carpentering the door, blackening and burning, respectively, while at the same time assuming that (2) its underlying nature equips it to do these observable actions but is (crucially) left underdetermined by the actions. In the Zayd case, Maimonides merely *states* the underdetermination by saying that carpentering the door etc. are "remote" from Zayd's underlying essence. But in the fire case, he *demonstrates* the underdetermination by indicating that two very different underlying natures — "six different principles" or "one active quality, heat" — might be equipping fire to do the blackening, burning, etc. So in identifying fire as that which blackens and burns, we have not committed ourselves to much about its underlying nature — only to its having what it takes to blacken and burn, and that could be six principles or one or presumably any number between.

Maimonides cashes in on this distance between actions and underlying essence in the God case. He presses that a thing does not have to have parts to have multiple actions. If fire can blacken and burn without being compound, how much more can God do multiple things without being compound? So for Maimonides attributes of action have a negative virtue. Like children who can be seen but not heard, it is what they do *not* do that makes Maimonides like them: they do not entail much about essence, thus in particular they do not entail God's essence is compound.

Moreover, attributes of action have a positive virtue that Maimonides seizes on in I.54: they are our way of knowing God. We see this in Maimonides' fascinating interpretation of Moses' two requests of God in Exodus 34, first to "show me Thy ways that I may know Thee" and second to "show me Thy Glory." God denies the second request — "Thou canst not see my face" — which Maimonides interprets as meaning that no one can know God's essence. But God grants the first request: "Thou canst see my back." The fascinating moment for my purpose here is that Maimonides stresses that the way Moses in fact sees God's back is *by* seeing God's ways, to quote: "his saying '*Show me now Thy ways, that I may know Thee*', indicates that God, may he be exalted, is known through His attributive qualifications; for when [Moses] would know the *ways*, he would know Him." The passage climaxes in Moses' seeing the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy when he sees God's back ("The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love…" etc.),[8] and in Maimonides' saying that "the apprehension of these actions is an apprehension of [God's] attributes…with respect to which He is known" (I.54). These are strong words. For Maimonides, knowing God's actions is how we know God's attributes. Though we cannot know God's essence, we can know God's actions, and that is knowing God as best we can.

Ib. Functional theology.

I do not agree with all of Maimonides' reasons for his focus on divine actions as the way to right speech and knowledge of God, e.g., I am not sure that God must be one undifferentiated unity, or that attributes of quality deny such unity by entailing composition in their subject. But I am still enamored with Maimonides' view for some of his other reasons. He is right that resisting talk of God's essence *de re* is epistemically humble: if there is a God, God must be beyond our ken since, for starters, God's creating the world entails God's being qualitatively different from everything within it.[9] Maimonides is also right that

8 The full passage is at Ex. 34:6-7 and reads: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children." Incidentally Maimonides takes these to be 12 attributes of mercy with the last attribute ("visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children…") not mercy but rather a sort of destructive providence, required to put an end to "all obstacles impeding the achievement of the perfection that is the apprehension of Him."

9 Leibniz drives this point home masterfully in his cosmological argument in the Monadology: after being unable to find a sufficient reason for the universe within the series of contingent things comprising it, he is forced to conclude that "the sufficient

talk of God's actions does not say much about God's essence while still allowing us to "back into" (forgive the pun) some information about God: when we say that God "forgives iniquity," for instance, though we do not state God's essence, we do say that, whatever God is like, God must be the kind of thing that can forgive. Divine action talk is thus specific (not vague, cf. to Philo's "the intelligible sun of the sensible sun" etc.), and in principle knowable, since it starts with putative records of human experience. It begins with "knowing the world in which we live," as Davies says of Aquinas.

In light of these many advantages, I use Maimonides' focus on divine action as the foundation stone for building functional theology. I also am inspired by work on functionalism in the philosophy of mind for identifying mental states by their function vs. by their constitution.[10] The standard example of a functional role there verges on the irreverent here, but it is still instructive: what makes something a carburetor is not that it has a particular shape or that it is made of steel or an alloy, but rather that — whatever it is like intrinsically — it mixes gasoline and air and then sends the combination out for ignition.[11] To replay Maimonides' example in this key: what makes something fire is not its internal constitution but rather that — whatever it is like intrinsically — it melts some things, hardens others, cooks, etc. Similarly, I am thinking, what makes something God, if anything is, is not its internal nature or constitution, but rather that — whatever it is like intrinsically — it plays a certain role in the world.

Once we adopt this strategy for identifying God, the next question is: what *is* the functional role of God? What is the divine analogue of 'a carburetor's being the thing that mixes gas and air and sends them out for ignition' or of 'fire's being the thing that melts some things, hardens others, etc.'?

Though it is an anachronism to say this, if Maimonides spoke in our terms he might well answer that the divine analogue of a functional role just is the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy he lighted on in the passage above: showing steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquities, not clearing the guilty, etc. I concur that these are a strong start to such a role. But they are incomplete; they do not include other important divine actions that surface in the central texts of the Jewish and Christian traditions.[12] It bears mention as I say this that turning to the central texts of the Jewish and Christian traditions to identify God as I am about to do and as Maimonides did in his way before me implies use of a criterion of adequacy for what makes something count as a genuine notion of God — namely, that *the candidate notion captures the God implicit in a tradition's major texts*. This criterion for adequacy is as good as any: it rightly restricts the notion of God to the God of a particular tradition[13], and uses publicly accessible and widely revered sources within the tradition to represent it. Still, there are of course other options, other possible criteria of adequacy, for identifying a notion of God as genuine. For example, John Bishop, at least back in 1998, constructed a role out of the "psychological economy of the believer." Identifying the options for criteria of adequacy and deciding which should be normative constitute important areas for future research.

After prolonged study of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, creeds, and major theologians,[14] I found marked agreement in these texts on a set of divine attributes of action which were frequently stated or

or final reason must be outside of the sequence or series of particular contingent things, however infinite this series may be" (37).

10 The affinity between my approach and functionalism in philosophy of mind is rough because a functional role in philosophy of mind is limited to extrinsic properties (or, according to some, even to strictly causal relations). As alert readers will notice in a moment, while the divine role I have in mind contains mainly extrinsic properties, it also contains some intrinsic relational properties (such as being the *proper* object of worship, trust, etc.).

11 The example is from Ned Block, "What is Functionalism?". In *Readings in Philosophy of Psychology: Vol. 1.*, ed. Ned Block (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Univ. Press); Block, "Block" in *Readings in Philosophy of Psychology*, 174–75. David Wiggins suggests that artifacts in general — clocks, pens, chisels, drinking vessels, etc. — might be similar examples. See David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), 87.

12 Moreover, some of the Thirteen Attributes sound less functional and more intrinsic, e.g., "merciful and gracious," "slow to anger." I think ultimately these can be read functionally, but it would take additional work to show how.

13 I don't know how to make sense of 'God' simpliciter, traditionless, see e.g. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher, eds., *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities* (Springer, 2013), Introduction.

14 Specifically, for the scriptures in the English I turned to the Jewish Publication Society's *Tanakh* for the Hebrew Bible and the *Oxford Study Bible* for the Christian New Testament. I used Bettenson's English renderings of the Christian Nicene and Apostle's Creeds, and singled them out since both are of contemporary and historical importance: currently, they are both doctrinal statements of the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Anglican, African Orthodox, and Lutheran Churches, and historically, the Apostles'

implied and, as far as I saw, never denied in these texts: God is that which *explains the existence of the universe, intervenes both providentially and miraculously in it, generates or affirms our moral obligations, ensures human flourishing, and delivers justice in the long run*. God also is *the actual and proper object of the religious attitudes of awe, hope, fear, trust, and love so plentiful in these texts, as well as the object of the firmly established practices of worship and prayer*. For convenience, call these actions the "divine jobs." We can use this role to construct the following claim to comprise the heart of functional theology: God is whatever does some substantial or central number of the divine jobs in the actual world, if anything does.[15]

I have laid out the divine functional role in the chart below. As it shows, the individual divine jobs grouped fairly naturally under five larger tasks — meaning clusters of jobs that comprise a larger function God is assumed to undertake according to these texts.[16] Notice that the Thirteen Attributes fall into the moral, providential and personal tasks, but they do not capture the transcendental or cosmological ones.

Functional Role of the Judeo-Christian God

	Causal Relations	Normative Relations	
Task	*Phenomena* God is taken to explain (theoretical phenomena underlined[17])	*Attitudes and emotions* of which God is taken to be the actual and proper object	*Practices* of which God is taken to be the actual and proper object
Transcendental	Numinous experience	Awe	Worship
Cosmological	Existence of the universe	Gratefulness, anger	Praises, laments
Moral	Rules of conduct;[18] ultimate justice and mercy; redemption	Hope, fear	Service, penitential prayer
Providential	Providential care, miracles	Trust	Petitionary prayer
Personal	Religious experience, scriptures	Love	Communing prayer
Singular	Be a single individual who does the other divine tasks		

The divine role just identified has *slack* in it: that is, to occupy the role, one does not have to do every single job exactly as stated, but rather, some central subset of them, in something like the way they are described. The slack is necessary here and in other cases where roles help comprise associated descriptions, because we are fallible theorizers.[19] Bohr *was* talking about atoms, it seems, even though he gave

Creed is derived from the Old Roman Creed, among the early and most important creeds in the West, while the Nicene Creed comes from the Creed of Caesarea, among the early and most important creeds in the East (see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longmans, Green and Co, 1950)). I used the *Shema* as a creedal stand-in for the Jewish tradition. As Shaye Cohen says, "Defining Judaism in this [creedal] way is completely foreign to antiquity. Ancient Judaism had no creeds … [However] the *Shema*, by virtue of its central place in the liturgy, serves well as a convenient outline of Jewish beliefs, much as the Ten Commandments served Philo and some medieval Jewish philosophers as a convenient summary of the laws of the Torah" (Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Westminster Press, 1987), 62, 79). For central Jewish and Christian theological texts, I turned to Augustine's *Enchiridion*; Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith and selections from Part I of his *Guide of the Perplexed*; and Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, part I, questions 1-26.

15 With the addition of 'in the actual world', functional theology makes 'God' a name (like 'YHWH') that rigidly designates a specific thing in the span of all possible worlds if it designates at all vs. a title (like 'the President') that non-rigidly designates whatever answers to it in a given world. This stipulation reflects the consistent use of 'God' in the tradition to pick out a specific thing that people take themselves to have had contact with in the actual world in the way the jobs describe. It also permits us to ask about that thing's nature and activity as Maimonides does for Zayd, e.g. is whatever does the divine jobs here, if anything does, a person or not? Could it be natural? Is it metaphysically necessary or not? Does it do the divine jobs in every world? etc.

16 For a detailed explication of passages from the authoritative texts that ground these jobs, see Chapter 4 of Diller, "The Content and Coherence of Theism".

17 The underlined terms have reference only if the theory that the traditional texts present about reality is true.

18 Though 'explain' is apt here on a voluntaristic conception of God's relationship to morality, it is too strong on a non-voluntaristic conception.

19 See, e.g., David Lewis, "Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 50 (1972): 252; and Peter Railton, "Non-cognitivism about Rationality: Benefits, Costs and an Alternative", *Philosophical Issues* 4 (1993): 47–48.

them a job involving orbitals they do not have; Newton *was* talking about gravity, even though he was wrong about its jobs far from the surface of the earth. Similarly, we could be talking about God, even if we are wrong about some of the jobs, in some way.[20] Of course, we should indulge our fallibility only so far; we should allow the role to flex only so much. We are right to say that there is no phlogiston, there are no unicorns, there is no Santa Claus, because there is nothing that does even a fair share of the jobs in the role associated with these terms. So also we would be right to say there is no God if there is nothing that does a fair share of the jobs in the divine role.

How wrong can the story go, how much of the divine role could something fail to do and still be thought to occupy it? As Wittgenstein said about the term 'Moses', it is hard to say — in advance, in general — how much must be proved false or impossible about God to give up the proposition that God exists (1958, sec. 79). I suspect that, when faced with the possibility that a being cannot do one or more of the jobs in the role, that for some combinations, 'this is God' will be obviously true; for others, it will be obviously false; and for others, we will throw up our hands and, if forced, make a judgment call. We will in fact have to exercise this kind of judgment below at the close of this paper.

Notice how the divine role thus understood fixes the referent of 'God' in a way that stays quiet about God's essence — a central boon I was seeking in constructing functional theology. That is, functional theology stipulates that God is the being who does a central subset of these jobs, but leaves open the question: what *de re* properties equip the being to do these things? Wonderfully for staying quiet about essence, the answer here comes in terms of a disjunction because the role *constrains* the nature of the thing that can fill it but does not *determine* it. Think back to carburetors for a moment. Not just anything can be a carburetor: steam cannot, for instance, because steam does not have what it takes to do a carburetor's jobs — the ability to receive and mix air and gas and send them out for ignition. Still, many other substances *can* be carburetors: steel, metal alloys — we can even make a whole room into a carburetor with a pool of gas and some fans.[21] Similarly, not just anything can be God because the jobs demand a lot out of an occupier: one has to have what it takes to create and redeem the world, be a plausible and worthy object of worship, etc. You and I, for instance, are not going to qualify. But a variety of natures *can* equip something to satisfy the role, including natures with less than the perfections.

Ic. Functional theology is distinct from perfect being theology.

Recall that what it takes to be God on perfect being theology is to be perfect. What it takes to be perfect on standard iterations of a perfect being theology is a compossible array of 'the omni's' (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipresence), 'the im's' (immutability, impassibility, impeccability), and a few other properties commonly taken to be perfections (incorporeality, necessity, aseity, timelessness, and simplicity).[22]

I grant that it is possible to be both perfect in this sense and able to do the divine jobs. But on point here it is also possible to be both imperfect in this sense and still able to do the divine jobs. For instance, doing the divine jobs does not *require* either of the two most important perfections, omnipotence and omniscience. A being who does the divine jobs has to have enough power to create the world and break the laws of nature. This is obviously a vast amount of power — enough, I think, when combined with appropriate amounts of knowledge and love, to inspire us to trust and pray to this being, even to worship this being. But such a being need not have *perfect* power in order to do these jobs. It could have lacked the power to make the universe twice as big as it is, or to make it more quickly than it did, or to dismantle

20 Saying there is slack in the term 'God' implies a certain fallibility in the texts of the tradition. This is, of course, a controversial claim in religious circles, but I espouse it.

21 I am indebted to Karen Bennett for the steam example, and to Lawrence Murphy for describing some of the mechanical constraints on carburetors.

22 These are the main properties that surface time and again in Augustine's *Enchiridion*, Anselm's *Proslogion*; Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* (Ia. 2-16); and Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, to name a few sources. For the record, from my research, the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience are the most widely cited, with some form of perfect goodness, immutability, incorporeality, and necessity next in line.

the sun in five seconds flat. The same holds true for the amount of knowledge a divine job doer needs. It has to know an immense amount — enough to make the world, to know each of our prayers, to assess our true natures so she can judge fairly when the time comes. But it need not know absolutely everything to do the jobs. It could fail to know fully what it is to despair; or fail to know the truth of counterfactuals in worlds sufficiently dissimilar to ours to be irrelevant to her intervening in this one; or perhaps even fail to know the three-thousand-forty-seventh digit of pi, if it turns out to make no practical difference to getting the jobs done. Thus, a less than perfect being can do the divine jobs.

II. THE THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Now envision what I will call the 'Adequate World' or '*A*', in which there is no perfect being but there is a less than perfect being who can, and in fact does, do the divine jobs. The being creates the world, intervenes in it providentially and miraculously, constitutes the source of greatest human fulfillment and flourishing, communes with the saints of the past, present and future, etc. The question is: is this being God?

The answer, it certainly seems to me, is yes. That is, if *A* were the actual world, I cannot picture even a staunch perfect being theologian facing this being and saying: "Yes, you are the one who created the world, and you are the one to whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were talking, and you are the one who has heard my prayers, and who will help provide for ultimate justice in my life and in the world at large, etc., but, with all due respect, I am not ready to call you 'God', for you are not the being than which no greater can be conceived." This response seems to me entirely out of keeping with what the Judeo-Christian tradition would suggest one should say in this situation — certainly out of keeping with what the scriptures would indicate.

If this thought experiment works, it licenses at least two interesting conclusions. First, it shows that doing the divine jobs is sufficient *de dicto* for being God, since the reason we are calling this being in *A* 'God' is that the being is doing the divine jobs. Second, this thought experiment shows this paper's thesis to be true: because an imperfect being can count as God by doing the jobs, being perfect is not necessary for being God.

III. OBJECTION AND REPLIES

Back in 1984, in the midst of an argument for perfect being theology (which he calls "Anselmianism"), Thomas Morris envisioned a being who is strikingly like the imperfect divine job doer in my thought experiment, i.e., a being that is not perfect but that:

> had created our universe and was responsible for the existence of intelligent life on earth … had been the one to call Abraham out of Ur, to speak to Moses, and to send the prophets … had somehow become incarnate in the man Jesus,…will be the one responsible for giving eternal bliss to all who are properly related to him … even sustain[s] directly the universe moment to moment…[23]

Relying on the assumption that the ontological argument is sound, Morris goes on to build a thought experiment that constitutes an objection to mine:

> Call the less than Anselmian being [the imperfect divine job doer] 'El' and the world in which he accomplishes all those prodigious feats [the divine jobs] '*W*'. If Anselmianism is coherent, an Anselmian being exists in some possible world. But by virtue of being necessary, he exists in every other world as well, including *W*. Now if in *W* there is a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and all the rest, surely El is not God, but rather, at best, the vice-regent or deputy of God, a sort of demiurge. If El is less than omnipotent, and there is an omnipotent, omniscient individual, then clearly anything El accomplishes is done only at the good pleasure, or according to the wishes of, the Anselmian being. El would not be the ultimate reality.

23 The passage appears in Thomas V. Morris, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Anselm", *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (1984); Morris, "The God of Abraham", 183. Notice Morris touches on jobs here that in my idiom fall into the cosmological, personal, and moral tasks.

> He would not be God. I think this conclusion is fully in accord with the properly religious usage of 'God' in Judeo-Christian orthodoxy, and in fact that it is a conclusion forced on us by that usage. If the object of worship in the Western tradition of theology is intended to be the ultimate reality, and if the Anselmian conception of God is coherent, the God of religious devotion is the God of the philosophers.

In other words, Morris claims that since a perfect being is possible, and, if possible, necessary, there is a perfect being in *every* world. So any time an imperfect divine job doer exists, it *coexists* with a perfect being. Moreover, put a perfect being head to head with an imperfect divine job doer and the perfect being will count as God since the perfect being will be the more "ultimate reality" of the two. So, to use my language, Morris concludes that being a divine job doer is not a sufficient condition for being God after all, since there is no world in which doing the jobs is sufficient for being God, and in fact that there is a world *W* in which doing them is *not* sufficient for being God. Thus, Morris would press that for all I have said, being perfect still seems necessary for being God.

But two replies back, the first of which is short and satisfies me, the second of which is long and I hope satisfies a perfect being theologian. First, as Morris knows, it is only if "Anselmianism is coherent" — if a perfect being is possible and thus necessary — that the Adequate World *A* without a perfect being is impossible. But I and many others are not convinced that a perfect being *is* possible, or that if it is, that it must be necessary.[24] If we are right, then for all Morris has said, *A* is possible, my thought experiment stands, and filling the divine role is sufficient for being God.

Second, if Anselmianism *is* coherent, then *A* would be impossible, *W* would be possible, and Morris would be right that the Anselmian being would be God in *W*. But, crucially and as I will argue, it would turn out that the Anselmian being is the ultimate divine job doer in *W*, too. That fact makes *W not* a counterexample to functional theology but instead idle against it; indeed, it may even confirm functional theology, if my closing comments are correct. Let me explain.

It will help me to start by explaining how I came to discover that the Anselmian being would be the ultimate divine job doer in *W*. For years, I was convinced that *W* as Morris describes it would be impossible even if there were a necessary perfect being and that thus it could pose no threat to functional theology. It seemed that if the Anselmian being were in a world filled with sentient creatures as in *W*, then its perfect goodness would send it to be involved with these creatures directly in the way the jobs describe: out of perfect love it would be the one to have created them, actively watch over them, help them flourish, etc. Why pass off this work to El? Would it even be responsible to do so, given that El is imperfect? However, prompted by Dean Zimmerman, I began to wonder whether there might be coherent situations in which an imperfect being is doing the divine jobs while a perfect being is standing by that could make *W* possible. I arrived at two.

The first reading is inspired by Plotinus: the Anselmian being could *emanate* El in the way Plotinus' the One emanates the demiurge.[25] To use the common neo-Platonic metaphors for emanation, in the same way that a fountain naturally (out of its nature) sprays its droplets or the sun beams its rays, so also the Anselmian being could be an impersonal, active first principle removed from the universe that naturally outpours El, a procession at a lower level of reality involved with the universe by creating it and doing the rest of the jobs in it. Just as the droplets and rays are how the fountain's and sun's natures appear further from them, so also El and its divine-job-doing might be how the Anselmian being's nature appears further from the source, slowed down. Interestingly, this reading of *W* is not only a possible but in fact a common way to envision how the divine relates to the universe in neo-Platonic thought.[26]

24 Here I echo Wierenga who, in the process of responding to this very passage from Morris, quotes Wainwright that Morris' argument "won't seem compelling to a person who doubts that the concept of a maximally perfect being is coherent, or wonders whether it includes necessary existence. Theists as well as nontheists often wonder both" (Edward Wierenga, "Augustinian Perfect Being Theology and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69, no. 2 (2011): 147).

25 Morris glosses El as 'a demiurge', so he may read *W* neo-Platonically himself.

26 See John P. Kenney, "The Platonic Monotheism of Plotinus", in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Springer, 2013), 778–79. His explication of Middle Platonic theology before Plotinus sounds particularly

On a second reading of *W,* the Anselmian being freely *creates* El out of nothing, and El in turn freely creates its own universe and tends the creatures in it as the divine jobs describe. In this case leaving the jobs to El would be a matter of the Anselmian being's voluntary choice, not an ineluctable overflow of its nature. So it is essential to stipulate additionally that in *W*, as in the problem of evil discourse, the Anselmian being has a justifying reason for that choice, since as intimated above it is an act of apparent negligence for a perfect being to rest the creation and care of especially sentient creatures in imperfect hands. Theodicies defending this choice could abound. To give one example, perhaps the Anselmian being stands back from the universe in order to give El the freedom necessary to develop and enjoy love, the greatest good, not unlike the way some theodicists think the creator of our universe does for us. We could also envision a multiverse version of this "creation" reading of W, in which the Anselmian being creates not just one but multiple Els each of whom in turn create and tend their own universe(s) in a way which produces some greater good overall than the perfect being creating and tending these universes itself.[27]

Both the emanation and creation scenarios are possible, and both realize the picture Morris stipulates for *W*: the Anselmian being is perfect and *not* doing the divine jobs as we read them in the texts for our universe, El is imperfect and *is* doing these jobs, and El or the Els serve "at the good pleasure of" or at least with the permission of the Anselmian being. Thus, these readings constitute two ways in which *W* is possible, two ways in which *W* might be. In fact, for reasons I relegate to a footnote, Morris' stipulations about *W* entail that these ways, or something very like them, are how *W* must be.[28]

Now it turns out that the *Anselmian being* is the ultimate divine job doer in *W*, even though it seems for all the world that El would be, given Morris' stipulations. Saying this requires making a judgment call of the kind I warned we would sometimes face: when a candidate is only partly filling the divine role or filling it in some non-standard way, we have to determine if it fills the role *enough* to count as God. Here the Anselmian being is filling central parts of the cosmological, moral and transcendental tasks in the most fundamental way in *W*, but not much if any of the personal or providential tasks. Take the cosmological task. The Anselmian being in *W* is metaphysically prior to El or the Els and their activity: it is producing (by emanation or creation) the El(s) and the conditions for universe-making which in turn produce the universes. So while it is true that El or the Els explain the existence of the *universe*, a term I will use hereafter to mean our physical universe and any other physical universes El or the Els might make, the Anselmian being explains the existence of *all there is*, meaning the full ontology of what is real,

like the relationship between the Anselmian being and El in W: "The theologies of Numenius and Alcinous both … presented the divine mind as distant and removed from materiality and the physical world. Emphasis was then placed upon a secondary mind or demiurge understood as the fashioner of the cosmos. This demotion of the demiurge to a secondary status suggests a deliberate effort to clarify the character of the first god [which Morris would call 'God'] such that it is wholly removed from any contact with materiality. The details of this model varied among the Middle Platonists, but it was common for active agency to be located in a secondary or even tertiary power" (778).

27 Thanks to a commentator for encouraging me to think about a multiple Els scenario.

28 Morris' description of *W* entails that these are the two main ways *W* could be. To see that, notice the description leaves a key question hanging: how do the Anselmian being and El come to be in *W*? There are three options: either (1) the Anselmian being and El each explains its own existence, or (2) El explains the Anselmian being's existence, or (3) the Anselmian being explains El's existence. Option (1) is inconsistent with Morris' stipulations about omnipotence. Even if an imperfect being such as El can be necessary (and that is a big "even if"), and even if it were possible for there to be two beings to be simultaneously necessary, if one of the necessary beings were omnipotent and the other not, then the non-omnipotent being is *not* explaining its own existence after all, since at least part of the explanation for its existence lies in the omnipotent being's allowing it to exist, as Morris implies. So option (1) cannot describe how the Anselmian being and El come to be in *W*. Option (2) — that El explains the Anselmian being — is also inconsistent with Morris' stipulations, specifically those that say the Anselmian being is necessary and that it has "all the rest" of the perfections, which I assume includes aseity. Even if El were also necessary (again, a big "even if"), and even if El necessarily emanated the Anselmian being to make the Anselmian being necessary too (as in Spinoza's *natura naturata*), still El could not emanate the Anselmian being without compromising its aseity, since the Anselmian being would rely on El for its existence and an *a se* being exists only from itself. So option (2) cannot describe how the beings come to be in *W* either. So *W*'s metaphysical backstory must be option (3): the Anselmian being must explain El's existence. Since Morris also takes El to be creating the universe, his description thus entails a chain in W: the Anselmian being explains El who in turn creates the universe. There are two main ways the Anselmian being might explain El: by emanation or by creation. Hence the two scenarios.

which in *W* will include not only the universe(s) but also El or the Els, the conditions for creation and the Anselmian being itself. Moreover, the way the Anselmian being explains all there is in *W* survives the counterfactual test: if there were no Anselmian being, there would be no El(s), no conditions for creation, and no universe(s). The Anselmian being is thus the ultimate, meaning the most fundamental, source of reality in *W* and the ultimate, or most fundamental, doer of the key part of the cosmological task, the job of explaining what there is. Similarly, the Anselmian being is doing a key part of the moral task. As a morally perfect ultimate source of all reality, it is the ultimate exemplification of (or perhaps even the source of) value in *W* — either efficiently and materially in the emanation case or efficiently in the creation case by creating El or the Els who bring about the flourishing of the universe(s), perhaps as medium for their own flourishing.[29] Finally, though I will not detail this here, at least the normative part of the transcendental task follows from the cosmological and moral tasks: a source of all reality and perfect goodness within a world would be properly worthy of worship there. That makes the Anselmian being the most fundamental doer of the most important parts of the cosmological, moral and transcendental tasks — what I have always taken to be the most central tasks in the job description. It is true that the Anselmian being is *not* doing the providential and personal tasks, or is doing them unevenly. If the Anselmian being is emanating El, it will be overflowing but not tending or relating to El or the universe. If it is creating, the Anselmian being may be doing the providential and personal tasks — not in the universe(s) since by hypothesis only El or the Els do that, but possibly for the Els themselves (see footnote 26).

If the Anselmian being were solo in *W*, without El or a competitor being God, in my judgment the jobs it *is* doing there would suffice to count it as God there, despite the divine jobs it is *not* doing. As my own research found and as David Burrell's research implies, explaining the existence of the universe is either a, or maybe even *the*, most central job of all the jobs in the divine role.[30] The fact that the Anselmian being is doing not only that crucial job but also is exemplifying moral value and is worthy of worship — well, if no one else were making a claim to be God, it seems obvious we would take it to be the divine job doer and thus God. In my view, this claim will hold even once we add El back as a contender for the title in *W*. Though by Morris' hypothesis El is completely filling the divine role in *W*, it is doing so only for *our universe*, while the Anselmian being is filling it at the more fundamental level of *all there is*. Moreover, the Anselmian being's divine job doing at the base level makes possible (in the counterfactual sense) El's divine job doing at the universe level as well. Thus, my judgment call: the Anselmian being is the ultimate divine job doer in *W*.

Assuming the Anselmian being is the ultimate divine job doer in *W*, we can draw the final conclusion of this, my long second reply to Morris: even if *W* is possible, Morris cannot point to *W* as a world in which a divine job doer fails to be God, since the divine job doer in *W is* God. So even if there is a necessary perfect being and *W* is possible, Morris' thought experiment does not show that functional theology is wrong. Moreover, as argued in my first reply, if there is no necessary perfect being and *A* is possible, for all Morris has said, my thought experiment shows that functional theology is right.

To close with a broader perspective: although I have argued here that filling the divine role is a sufficient condition for being God, I want to underscore that I take being perfect to be a sufficient condition for being God, too, in light of the tradition's emphasis on the perfections visible in this paper and beyond (more can be said here, but this suffices for now). That is, just as in *A* where nothing is perfect but a be-

29 The "source" claim would hold on a voluntaristic conception of God's relationship to morality, and the exemplification one on a non-voluntaristic one. Regarding helping the Els flourish: the fact that the Anselmian being has a justifying reason for allowing the Els to do the divine jobs may imply it is watching over them, since such reasons often involve the well-being of those involved.

30 Kenney on Burrell: "Burrell has discussed various ways by which Western monotheists, including Plotinus, have articulated their understanding of God's transcendence, emphasizing what he calls 'the distinction' [David B. Burrell, "Thomas Aquinas and Islam", *Modern Theology* 20, no. 1 (2004)]. The core credendum of all monotheism is that the first principle is distinct from the world which it is invoked to explain. As such, it must be seen as the One from which all things come forth, but it cannot be part of that universe" (Kenney, "The Platonic Monotheism", 779). There is a conjunction of ideas here: the core understanding of God is that it brings forth all things, and it is distinct from them. I lean on the first conjunct here.

ing is doing the divine jobs we count this being as God *in virtue of its doing the divine jobs*, so also in the converse world, call it '*W2*' where nothing is doing the divine jobs but a being is perfect we would count this being as God *in virtue of its being perfect*. The fact that both these conditions are sufficient should come as no surprise given their long lineage in the Judeo-Christian tradition: they are conceptual traces of the ancient Jewish and Greek views about God, respectively — views which met in the Middle East during a period of Hellenization there under Alexander the Great.[31] The fusion of these two ways of understanding God had shadowy beginnings in the Jewish wisdom literature, was unmistakable by the time of Philo,[32] and settled in as orthodoxy by the time of Augustine.[33] Western monotheism has been thinking of God by mixing both views ever since. Though there are conceptual tensions between the two views that have resulted in infighting about whether God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (the divine job doer in my idiom) or the God of the philosophers (the perfect being), orthodox thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Maimonides have always taken God to be *both*, as Wierenga, Stump and others have forcefully argued.[34] It is traditional that God is not *just* perfect or *just* a divine job doer but rather that God is a *perfect divine job doer*.

Functional theology has a nice way of framing how God could be a perfect divine job doer: a being could be doing the divine jobs and count as God *de dicto by* being perfect *de re*. That is, in the same way that Maimonides took fire to be *de dicto* anything that blackens, burns, etc. and then decided that in fact fire does all that *de re* by being "one active principle, heat," so also on functional theology we can take God to be *de dicto* anything that fills enough of the divine role, and then decide that in fact God does all that *de re* by being perfect. Indeed, though I am not at all sure this is their definitive view (or mine), there are moments where Wierenga and Stump imply that the whole reason traditional thinkers take God to be perfect is because God's perfection *follows* from God's doing the divine jobs — both historically and philosophically.[35] In such moments, functional theology looks conceptually prior to perfect being the-

31 By this time, the Jews had moved from henotheism to monotheism and were taking the God who had brought them out of Egypt to be not just their God but the God of the universe, all the while identifying God by God's deeds, as explained at the start. The Jewish thinkers recoiled at the Greek polytheistic gods of the masses but noticed a harmony between their own view of God and talk of a similar ultimate creative force with universal scope under various names in the pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle. The Greek philosophers described such a being using the perfections — e.g., Parmenides' One Being was "unborn and imperishable, whole, unique, immovable and without end" (W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965-81), see especially 26 and 31, verses 3-5 and 22-5 of fr. 8) and Aristotle's Unmoved Mover was "eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things" (*Metaphysics* 1073a2-11) — so separate in fact that not only were the divine jobs not a focus in his thought, some of them were even impossible in it. The views were thus similar enough to combine (both were about one God), but different enough that their combination has created at least apparent conceptual tension for millennia (e.g., can an immutable being change enough to answer prayer?).

32 Philo (30 BCE-45 CE) was a perfect Greek and devout Jew who took God to be "personal, as the Jewish theology teaches, but…at the same time Pure Being, absolutely simple, free…self-sufficient … [and] absolutely transcendent" (Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Vol. I. Greece and Rome* (Doubleday, 1985), 458).

33 "If we wish to avoid blasphemy, we must either understand or hold it on faith that God is the supreme good, the being than which nothing better can be or be conceived" (Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* (Regnery Publishing Company, 1996) 1, 82).

34 This is Augustine's view according to Wierenga: "Augustine certainly thought that the perfect being he described was the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Wierenga, "Augustinian Perfect Being Theology", 145, see also 141). This is Aquinas' view according to Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers* (Marquette Univ. Press, 2016), e.g. in her last sentence of the book: "And so, for that exemplary and influential proponent of classical theism Thomas Aquinas, the God of the philosophers and the God of the Bible are the same God…" (109). For Anselm, see Wierenga, "Augustinian Perfect Being Theology", 149, footnote 6 and for Maimonides see how his simultaneous use above of e.g. the Biblical passage of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy and his use of perfect being theology for God assume that God is both the God of the Bible and the God of the philosophers.

35 Wierenga says that the "properties endorsed by the philosophers emerge out of philosophical reflection on and development of Biblical and religious concerns" and then quotes Kenney saying that the concepts of omniscience and omnipotence are "the result of reflection by philosophers and philosophically minded theologians upon elements in the religious tradition of western theism" and footnotes Anselm's claim that 'we ought to receive with certainty not only whatever we read in Holy Scripture but also whatever follows from it with rational necessity…'" (146). For Stump see *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers* (Marquette Univ. Press, 2016). Though most of the book is an attempt to show that classical theism (God's being perfect in my idiom) and biblical theism (God's doing the divine jobs, in my idiom) are consistent, at the end of the book, in a section on implications, she argues that "classical theism provides a powerful intellectual basis for the portrayal of God in the Bible" (97) — aka in my idiom, that being

ology, and filling the divine role seems necessary *and* sufficient *de dicto* for being God. But here I have argued only that filling the divine role is at least sufficient *de dicto* for being God. Thus, being perfect is not necessary *de dicto* for being God, and *a fortiori* not necessary and sufficient *de dicto* for being God, as Anselm and Descartes and others have supposed. Moreover, combining the idea that doing the divine jobs is sufficient for being God with the conclusion from Part Ic that it does not take the perfections *de re* to do them, we find that being perfect is not necessary *de re* for being God either. So being perfect is not necessary either *de dicto* or *de re* for being God.[36] These findings are a boon for theists. If ever we discover there is no perfect being, there could still be a God, provided something is doing enough of the divine jobs.[37]

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perfect provides a basis for God's doing the divine jobs. She proceeds to argue in fascinating ways e.g., that being eternal would help God do the providential task (98, including with answering prayers about the past 99) and the personal task by allowing it to experience suffering and death and thus co-feel with its creatures in the personal task (99-101). Moreover, God's being simple could help it do the moral task (101-2) and the cosmological task, by explaining why God would have to be necessary as required for it to explain the existence of everything else (102-3). If it works, the argument licenses the claim that a perfect being *could* do the divine jobs (a claim I hold, too). I wonder, though, if Stump would hold something stronger — that a perfect being *must* be doing the divine jobs (a claim I rejected in Part Ic above).

36 In saying this I do not mean to exclude the possibility that a being who is necessarily perfect *de re* might be doing the divine jobs and thus be God. My point is just that it is not necessary de dicto that such a being is God.

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